

Jeremiah 29: Contextualizing Scripture

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Immediate Context

Jeremiah sent a letter with instructions from God to the Israelites who had been exiled to Babylon by the invading Babylonian king, king Nebuchadnezzar. In his epistle, Jeremiah directed the exiled Israelites to settle down roots, raise families, increase in number, and accept the new location they live in as their own (Jer. 29:5-7,10). Throughout the immediate context, we see God judge sin while giving hope to His people. God revealed His dominion over the exiled Israelite's situation, stating "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon" (Jer. 29:4). God said the Israelites were in Babylon because of His judgement and that His plan of exile was not going to quick but drawn out over time. Through this, God still gave hope to His people as He told the exiled Israelites to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which [God] had carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jer. 29:7). What great hope it was for the Israelites to be able to live in peace and abundance while exiled amongst their enemies.

Chapter 29

God's command to the exiled Israelites in Jeremiah 29:7 showed His provision amid a trivial time. To some degree it might have caused conflict and uncertainty because of the false prophets living amongst the exiles who were spreading lies, telling everyone they would only be in exile for two years (Jer. 29:31, 28:30). One can imagine the turmoil amongst the exiles as they probably said each other "why is God telling us to plant fields for future generation, raise and grow families, make peace in our new neighborhoods while He is telling these prophets that we are only going to be in exile for two years?" God's wrath fell upon these false prophets as He declared "For they have done outrageous things in Israel...in my name they have uttered lies... I

will surely punish [them]...[they] will not see the good things I will do for my people, declares the LORD” (Jer. 29:23,32). In context of Chapter 29, verse seven was not a command to bring unrest but rather hope, for where God’s judgment is found, His hope abounds even more. It seems fitting that God would give His people this hope as a steppingstone to an even greater hope that He promised upon their return from exile. He says in Jeremiah 29: 12-13 “you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Book of Jeremiah

The Word of the Lord called upon Jeremiah and appointed him as a prophet, telling him “Today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and plant” (Jer. 1:10). The book of Jeremiah continues the theme of God’s judgment (“uproot and tear down”) and hope (“build and plant”) not only to His people, but to all nations. Israel rejected God’s grace and call to repentance as they refused to turn from their idolatry, social injustices, and even child sacrifices. God judged sin by sending Babylon to conquer (and exile) Israel and all of its neighbors, saying “Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad because of the sword I will send among them” (Jer. 25:15-16). During this exile we see God’s faithfulness and hope prevail as He promised to “bring health and healing to [Israel]; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me” (Jer. 33:6-8). Renowned Jewish theologian, Abraham Heschel,

writes on this “inner wrestling” of God as a good Father to a rebellious child, “But should Israel cease to be His home, then God, we might say, would be without a home in the world. He would not have left His people altogether, but He would be among them like a stranger, like a wayfarer.”¹ Reading Jeremiah 29:7 in context of the book of Jeremiah as a whole reveals the verse to be even more of a significant promise of hope. Although God promised a future hope (after the exile) for Israel, His compassion allowed the exiles to experience current hope, peace and even fruitfulness amidst the unrest.

Covenantal Context

Jeremiah 29:7 comes at a time when God had betrothed himself to His creation through five covenants. Most notable was His covenant to the Israelite nation, whom He had brought out of the hands of their enemies, the Egyptians, and into a land flowing with milk and honey. God promised to make Israel into a holy people and kingdom that would spread His blessing to all nations (Ex. 19: 5-6). This covenant was conditional upon Israel fully obeying God. But Israel did not uphold their part of the covenant, and although God was justifiable to terminate the covenant, He did not. Instead, God continued to pardon and bless the Israelite nation. Even when Israel dealt with the consequences of their actions, mostly through falling captive to other nations, God still provided and brought prosperity to His people. God’s loyal love demonstrated generation after generation to his covenant people was yet again exemplified in Jeremy 29:7 when He promised prosperity to them even while captive (again) to a foreign enemy.

Historical Cultural Context

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody, Ma: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 143.

Jeremiah became a prophet in the year 625 BC and was active during the reigns of the last four kings of Judah: Josiah, 640-609 BC, Jehoiakim, 609-598 BC, Jehoiachin, 598-597 BC, Zedekiah, 597-587 BC.² In 931 BC, Israel divided into two kingdoms: the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah. For nearly two hundred years, all the northern kingdom's kings did evil in the sight of the Lord. Finally, in 722 BC, Assyria captured the northern kingdom and sent them into exile. In the southern kingdom, fourteen of the nineteen kings did evil in the sight of the Lord and in 605 BC King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured and sent them into exile.³ Although Israel continually rejected and did evil in the sight of God to the point of falling captive to other nations (Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Alexander the Great, and Rome), God desired intimacy with His people. Abraham Heschel explains, "Jeremiah depicted the dramatic tension in the inner life of God. As in Abraham's debate with God over the threatened destruction of Sodom, there was an implied desire not to let the judgment fall upon Judah. Jeremiah 5:1 says "Go to and fro in the streets of Jerusalem... To see whether you can find one who does justly, who practices faithfulness, says the Lord."⁴ Even the most rebellious of people could not keep God from withholding His love and faithfulness. There was no better way for God to demonstrate this than His commitment of growth, peace, and prosperity for the Israelites in a time of captivity and exile (Jer. 29:7).

Old Testament Context

The Old Testament is the story of how a faithful bride, God, interacted and dealt with the perpetual failure of a faithless groom, humanity (Jer. 31:32). Amidst a rebellious people, God

² Ibid., 130.

³ Köstenberger Andreas J and Richard Duane Patterson, *For the Love of God's Word : An Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Kregel Academic, 2015), 38-39.

⁴ Ibid., 137.

continued to display His justness but never without offering hope. Jeremiah 29:7 is no exception as God gave a present hope for the exiled Israelites. But that hope was a small taste compared to the hope that awaited them upon return from exile. In context of the Old Testament, Jeremiah 29:7 offers an even bigger glimpse of a hope that awaited the world through a new covenant. The conclusion of the Old Testament leaves the Israelites (and the reader) in anticipation of a hope and glory that one day would transform the heart of God's people forever. He revealed this to Malachi, the last of the prophets before a new covenant, saying "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple." (Mal. 3:1).

Biblical-Theological Context

In context of Biblical-Theology, Jeremiah 29:7 magnifies God's compassion, grace, steadfast love, and faithfulness without compromising His justice and promise to not leave the guilty unpunished (Ex. 34:6). In the beginning God created a unified and beautiful creation, free of sin or decay, with human beings bearing the very image of God. But humans rebelled and desired to create for themselves their own name and identity to bear. The story came to a climax as God decided to make and take the ultimate judgment of sin upon Himself by becoming human in Jesus Christ, dying for His creations' sins, and raising to life in order to offer those who believe in His name the gift of eternal life, that is, life restored back to its unified and beautiful self, free of sin and decay (John 3:16). This eternal promise of hope experienced today by Christ followers is very similar to God's future promise of hope the exiled Israelites were given in Jeremiah 30-33. But God does not leave His people empty handed in anticipation of this future hope, but rather, He has given us a down deposit and guarantee, Holy Spirit. "Now it is God who

makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Cor. 1:21-22).

Likewise, God did not leave the Israelites to rot in exile in Babylon, but instead, promised hope for His people, saying “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jer. 29:7). God’s children today can live in a world captive to sin and evil with Truth, joy, and hope just like His children back then were able live in peace and prosperity in a foreign land captive to enemies.

Bibliography

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